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Horizon Award Winner Essay

An Oasis in Shifting Sands: NASIG at 25

Jennifer Sauer, 2010 Award Winner

Oasis - noun

1. A small fertile or green area in a desert region, usually having a spring or well.
2. Something serving as a refuge, relief, or pleasant change from what is usual, annoying, difficult, etc.: *The library was an oasis of calm in the hectic city.*

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/oasis>

In how many ways can we extend the metaphor of an “oasis in shifting sands” when addressing the information profession’s role in making a desert region fertile and green – a refuge, a relief, a pleasant change?

The above definition’s example provides one that instantly comes to mind – library as refuge. Though the metaphor in the sentence, “The library was an oasis of calm in the hectic city” addresses the information agency from the standpoint of place, we can easily apply it to the mission of the agency. When the public is thirsty to know, when they are thirsty for guidance, when they are thirsty for ideas or entertainment, they turn to those institutions and professionals whose mission it is to provide access to information. We as information professionals want to aid the search, want to teach the skill, want to draw water from the well of resources both physical and virtual and set it in front of the thirsty traveler. It is the very heart of what we do – helping people access information.

And when sands are shifting beneath the feet of information users, the library or information agency as oasis takes upon greater meaning. The last twenty years provide rich material for examination of the oasis in shifting sands. The ascension of the Internet as the go-to source for anything and everything a person wants to know has been seen by some as a harbinger of the death of the library. If everything is on the world wide web, then there is no need to seek out the services of agencies and professionals. But in truth, it has underscored the need for the type of guidance and assistance that information agencies and professionals provide. Whether the user is seeking access to a computer to initiate a search, needs classes to learn how to use a computer or software program, or help in deciphering the information overload that results from keyword searching on the world wide web, the information professional has something to offer.

The shifting sands of global economic downturn further highlight the oasis-nature of our mission. In an era of crashing markets, depreciating assets and the resulting epidemic unemployment, we see clearly the necessity and the value of the service that we provide. And so many seek the service that we cannot help but be reminded that not everyone has access to those tools and resources that some believe to be ubiquitous within our modern society. So many people make their way to our oasis for assistance in the employment search, to update resumes, to update skills. We, as professionals, cannot make the mistake of thinking that information comes in only certain defined packages. We must be

ready to serve as refuge, relief and provider in ways that answer the information need of our patrons.

How do we do that? Shifting sands do not discriminate. Those who work so hard to provide the refuge, the relief, the pleasant change are just as in need of an oasis as is the constituency they serve. Agencies and professionals have also felt the effects of transforming technology, of economic downturn. In the age of rapidly shrinking budgets and shuttered libraries, how can we do more with less – with much, much less? Agencies have to learn to innovate, to reinvent. If necessity is the mother of invention, then this era should be one of innovative new models; of dedicating sweat and tears when there are not dollars. Where will we find the inspiration for this effort? In times of feast or in times of famine, from what well do professionals slake their thirst?

We slake our thirst from organizations like NASIG. Professional organizations offer us the opportunity to gather, to kibbutz with like-minded professionals, to debate the value or effectiveness of a service, resource or process. We can take in programming dedicated to the nitty-gritty of managing resources, the introduction of new technologies/platforms, and inspirational lectures. On a smaller scale, we benefit from interactions on listservs and discussion forums which provide quick support and answers to the everyday minutiae of what we do. The roots of knowledge, experience, and a willingness of members to share this work stabilize the ground within this oasis, and help to keep the shifting sands at bay. Here NASIG provides us the fertile ground needed to sustain our mission.